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OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

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25 August 1955

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 56-55

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SUBJECT: Comments on Mr. [] Memo of 13 August 1955

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1. There surely is no real difference of view between Mr. [] and O/NE in their respective evaluations of the main trends in current Soviet policy. O/NE is entirely aware that there has been no fundamental change in Soviet purposes and that the USSR's present behavior is inspired among other things by a desire to gain time in which to improve the relative power position of the Bloc.

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2. One of Mr. [] objections to the Board's memorandum of 27 July seems to us therefore to rest on a misconstruction of what the Board intended to say, created largely by some unfortunate phraseology in the Board memo. As is evident from the context in which it appeared, the Board's statement "that the Soviets intend to suspend the cold war for an extended period" meant only that the USSR was abandoning the tactics which it has hitherto pursued in the cold war. It did not mean that the USSR was abandoning the goals that it has pursued heretofore. Indeed, we are inclined to stress, perhaps more than Mr. [] whose emphasis on the time-winning theme seems to attribute current Soviet tactics solely to gaining time, the positive threat which these tactics carry to the cohesion and readiness of the Western alliance. We believe that the Soviet leaders hope by their present line not only to gain a few years during which risks of war are reduced, but to make positive advances toward their goals.

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3. This latter difference of emphasis apparently arises from a tendency in Mr. [] thinking to lay great stress, and we think too great stress, on the purely military elements in the Soviet appraisal of the world situation. We should not overlook the Soviet tendency to regard the political factors as primary in connection with military problems. The USSR will prefer if at all possible to limit the military factor in its effort to expand and to rely primarily on the manipulation of political forces. Moreover, if the Soviets see the

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coming of nuclear stalemate correctly, and there are increasing indications that they do, they realize that its risks will be as great for them as for the West. We do not think therefore that they look forward to a time when, having improved their relative power position, they can pursue an adventurist policy with impunity, even on a local scale. Mr. [] argument seems to imply that once the Soviets have caught up and have nuclear parity, then they will revert to an aggressive policy. We think that the Soviet leaders have probably now realized what everyone else has long since realized, that nuclear war in the period of mutual plenty would destroy both sides. Therefore, we think it likely that they have recognized that they must now, for a long period, pursue their goals primarily by political means. This means that they do not expect to gain their objectives by a military confrontation of the Western alliance in which the latter would be terrorized into local concessions. Rather they intend first to split up the alliance by the patient application of political means over a long period. During this process, they will not, of course, neglect to use the time gained to improve their own military position, not only on grounds of prudence, but because they understand as well as we the importance of a "position of strength" to an effective diplomacy.

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4. Thus, we regard Mr. [] more fundamental criticism (that we fail to stress that the USSR is primarily "playing for time in a military sense)* as giving undue weight to one factor among the many motivating the Kremlin at this time. In our view, as stated in the pre-Geneva memo of 4 June, their policy "proceeds from a highly complex and mixed motivation." Paragraphs 12-23 of that memo give an account of some of the factors which we believe figure in present Soviet thinking. In retrospect, we believe that the desire to play for time until the USSR catches up militarily might well have received some greater and more explicit emphasis. It would be a dangerous oversimplification however, to imply that it is the only or even the chief Soviet motivation. We believe that, in addition to their growing realization of the dangers of nuclear war referred to above, the following played a part in the recent changes in Soviet conduct: the February 1955 change in leadership, ratification of the Paris accords and the consequent revival of German military power, growing tension in the Formosa Strait, economic problems for the solution of which

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* Mr. [] made the same point in a memo of 23 June criticizing the Board's memo on "Soviet Policy in the Coming Four Power Negotiations," 14 June 1954. The Board's post-Geneva memo of course was not intended to cover basic Soviet motivations but merely (based on the pre-Geneva analysis of these) to assess the current direction of Soviet policy.

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some easing of the arms race seemed mandatory. Added to these was probably the realization, as suggested in paragraph 2 above, that there were real offensive possibilities in abandoning the counter-productive Stalinist line and going over to conciliatory tactics which would have a better chance of dividing the West.

5. Even if it is conceded that one element in the motivation of present Soviet policy is the desire to play for time, we ought not to overlook the effects which the "relaxation of tensions" policy may have on the USSR itself. It is impossible for the Soviet government to abate the mood of hostility and danger and to replace it with expectations of peace without in some degree limiting its freedom of action to revert to the earlier course. Presumably the present regime would be even more limited in this respect than was the USSR under Stalin. It is impossible not to believe that many influential elements in the USSR will respond to the prospect of a long period of peace, and would be reluctant to enter upon a new period of danger. Thus supporters and interests within the Soviet system itself are likely to be rallied behind the present course. The West, always provided that it remains strong and united, may therefore have the kind of opportunities for influencing Soviet policy which were forecast in the [] report on Soviet vulnerabilities. Indeed, the West's opportunities to pose alternatives to Soviet policy would seem to be vastly greater, if the present posture of Soviet policy continues, than they were when that report was written. It is conceivable that ultimately a skillful Western policy, based equally on military strength and political and propaganda agility at all levels of contact and negotiation, could make it impossible for the USSR to enter again upon a policy of active threat.

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6. Mr. [] preference for the views set forth in the [] paper is difficult to understand in the light of his desire to emphasize growing Soviet capabilities. The whole argument of the [] paper proceeds from a belated realization that the USSR has problems and weaknesses. These limitations on Soviet freedom of action the Board has tried repeatedly to point out in its papers over the last several years. On the other hand, Mr. [] would now suddenly have it that "their whole setup is showing cracks all over" and that it is now possible to foresee "the outline of their death." Neither in the pre and post-Geneva memos nor in estimates has the Board ever presented such a picture of Soviet weakness. On the contrary, the net impression left by the Board's memo of 27 July is that the Soviets are acting on the assumption that their present position is a strong one. We believe that intelligence must equally avoid either underestimating or overestimating Soviet capabilities since there are dangers in a US policy based on either of these errors.

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7. With respect to Mr. [] strong feeling that we must always discuss capabilities at the same time as intentions (lest we mislead the policymaker), national estimates do as a general practice lay great and repeated stress on growing Soviet capabilities, most recently in NIE's 11-3-55, 11-5-55, 11-7-55, and 11-10-55. We can hardly be regarded as having failed to paint for the policymaker a full picture of growing Soviet capabilities (except where our intelligence was off, as in the case of the Bison bomber). Therefore, we would hardly consider that in general there is a "grave inadequacy in our intelligence analysis of Soviet behavior" or a failure to "constantly reiterate the facts of life about Soviet capabilities."

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